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ABSTRACT

To assess the potentially stigmatizing effects of the label "developmentally delayed," a term used to identify young children in need of early intervention, this study surveyed preschool teachers from Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The 89 teachers who responded to the survey were all female, and all but 16 had received some undergraduate or graduate training in special education. The survey included a brief vignette that described a typical 4-year-old child. Half the vignettes stated that the described preschooler was labeled developmentally delayed. The other surveys included the same vignette, but the child was not labeled. Teachers were asked to respond, using a Likert scale, to two statements concerning: (1) the child's ability to succeed in their classroom; and (2) their own ability to teach the child. Analysis of the responses indicated no significant difference between teachers' attitudes concerning the success of labeled and nonlabeled preschoolers, and no significant difference between teachers' perceived ability to teach labeled and nonlabeled preschoolers. (MM)

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Preschool Teachers' Expectations of Preschoolers Labeled Developmentally Delayed: A Pilot Study

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Abstract

As PL 99-457 does not require the use of categorical labels in order to receive funding for children, the noncategorical term, "developmentally delayed", is being used to identify young children in need of early intervention. In an attempt to assess the potentially stigmatizing effects of noncategorical labels, this study surveyed preschool teachers' attitudes in two areas: (1) the predicted success potential of young children labeled developmentally delayed, and (2) their perceived ability to teach noncategorically labeled preschoolers. Statistical analysis of the results indicate no significant difference between attitudes towards labeled and non-llabeled preschool children in either area.

Preschool Teachers' Expectations of Preschoolers Labeled Developmentally Delayed

In the field of education, there has been much debate over the use of descriptive labels to identify children in need of special services. P.L. 94-142 requires the use of diagnostic categories for school-age handicapped students before states may receive federal funds. On the surface, these definitions serve a valuable purpose. They differentiate between students whose handicapping conditions imply a specific instructional approach; they provide a means of communication between professionals and parents; and, they serve an administrative and organizational purpose in justifying the use of federal funds (Potter, Ysseldyke, Regan, & Algozzine, 1983).

Unfortunately, however, closer scrutiny at the practice of labeling children, particularly very young children, reveals little positive information.

Sociological deviance theory suggests that "labels cause changes in the expectancies of significant persons in the social system" (Reschly & Lamprecht, 1979, p. 55). The attachment of a label to a student is equivalent to attaching a deviant status to that individual. That sense of deviancy is assimilated by the student and is expressed through his behaviors and through the

behaviors of significant others in his environment who are cognizant of the label.

Much of the research on the issue of labeling special-needs children confirms the negative claims of the theory. Foster, Schmidt, & Sabatino (1976) found that the label, "learning disabled", caused a negative change in teachers' observations of child behavior. In a study by Foster, Ysseldyke, & Reese (1975), teacher trainees enrolled in a college level special education class negatively rated a normal child described as emotionally disturbed. Minner and Prater (1984) found that college faculty members responded negatively to potential students who had been labeled as learning disabled.

The issue of labeling very young children is an even more critical one, as development in the early years is characterized by change. As discussed by Smith and Schakel (1986), the detrimental consequences of labeling and "mislabeling" are more obvious in this population. The variability of early childhood behavior and intelligence, the lack of predictability of assessment instruments, and the lack of valid and reliable measuring tools are just a few of the problems encountered in the diagnostic and labeling process (Peterson, 1987; Sheehan, 1988).

P.L. 99-457, passed in 1986, mandates that all of the educational rights afforded to children under P.L. 94-142 be extended to include children birth through age five. One important difference in the two laws is that P.L. 99-457 does not require that states categorically label children. Instead, the noncategorical terms, "developmentally delayed" and "at-risk", are being used to identify young children in need of early intervention. Harbin, Gallagher, & Terry (1991) have provided an excellent overview of various state policy documents dialing with the definitions required by P.L. 99-457.

As discussed by Mallory & Kerns (1988), such noncategorical labels tend to encourage optimism in both parents and professionals, whereas categorical labels require a deficit approach and offer limited hope for future performance. However, shortly after P.L. 94-142 was implemented, Foster et al. (1976) made the statement that "the learning disabilities movement has created a new category of deviancy" (p.61). The question to be asked now is, "Will the noncategorical movement in early childhood do the same?" Fortunately, early studies on this issue are proving otherwise.

Recently, Zimmerman, Talbert, & Prater (unpublished) conducted a study on kindergarten teachers' expectations concerning students in their classroom labeled developmentally delayed. They found no significant difference between teachers' attitudes towards

kindergarten children labeled developmentally delayed and those not labeled. They concluded by expressing the hope that the positive results are indicative of a more positive attitude towards special needs children and not simply reflective of the "novelty of a new label".

The purpose of this study was to determine: (a) if the use of the noncategorical label, "developmentally delayed", affects preschool teachers' expectations concerning the potential success of students in their classrooms, and (b) if teachers' perceptions of their ability to teach preschoolers varies when the child is labeled "developmentally delayed".

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 89 preschool teachers within the four states of Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee. Special education and preschool coordinators from each of the four states were contacted and asked to participate by distributing the survey to preschool teachers in their district. All the respondents were female, and all but 16 had received some undergraduate or graduate training in special education. Most of the teachers (72%) had been teaching preschool for less than five years. Sixty-seven percent taught in a regular preschool, while 33% taught in a special or integrated program. Thirty-eight percent of the teachers had completed a master's degree.

Procedures

A brief vignette of a typical four-year old child was developed using objectives from the Learning Accomplishment Profile (Sanford & Zelman, 1981). The vignette was socially validated as representative of a typical preschooler by five preschool teachers with 100% agreement.

The vignette and a questionnaire was mailed to the preschool teachers. Approximately one-half of the vignettes randomly mailed simply described the child as follows:

> Joel is an attractive little boy who recently turned four. He occasionally cries a little when brought into the preschool by his mother, but the tears subside quickly as he becomes involved in the day's activities. He is especially happy during outdoor play time and can usually be observed chasing a ball he just kicked or maneuvering a riding toy through the play area. He can state his first name, identify four basic colors, and complete a simple 3 or 4 piece puzzle. Joel does not like to sit still for story time, but he does enjoy music and reciting simple nursery rhymes.

The other half concluded with the statement that the child had been labeled developmentally delayed by the school diagnostician. the vignette was followed by two statements: "I believe this student has

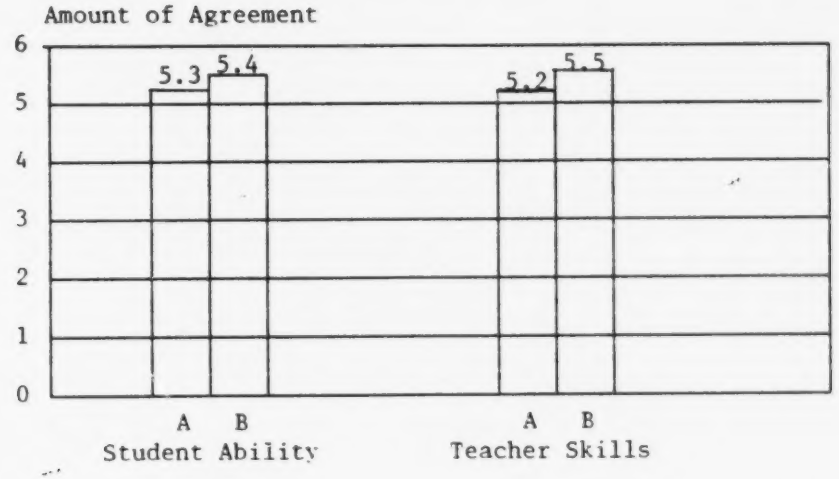
the ability to succeed in my classroom", and "I believe that I have the necessary skills to teach this student". The teachers were asked to respond to the statements using a Likert type scale ranging from one (very strongly disagree) to six (very strongly agree). The teachers were also asked to respond to demographic questions concerning where they taught, how many years they had been teaching, and their professional training.

Results

In response to the statement, "I believe this student has the ability to succeed in my classroom", 100% of the teachers predicted success for the non-labeled child. The mean response was 5.4 on the scale from one to six. Further, 94% predicted success for the labeled child, with a mean response of 5.3.

Table 1

X Score by Label



A = labeled preschoolers
B = non-labled preschoolers

To the second statement, "I believe that I have the necessary skills to teach this student", 100% responded that they did have the skills to teach the non-labeled child. The mean response to the non-labeled child on the Likert scale was 5.5. Ninety-two percent of the respondents believed they had the skills to teach the labeled child, and their mean response was 5.2.

Discussion

Statistical analysis of the data indicated no significant difference in teachers' attitudes concerning the success of

preschoolers labeled "developmentally delayed" and those not labeled and their ability to teach labeled and non-labeled preschoolers. There are several possible explanations for the differences between this research project and earlier studies on the effects of labeling. As Zimmerman et al. (unpublished manuscript) noted, the reason may simply be a more positive attitude towards children with special needs. Possibly, however, the reason may be more directly related to the nature of early intervention programs. The design of the typical preschool classroom is not oriented to academic achievement as in the school grades. Teachers may be more willing to accept children with potential learning difficulties when their programs do not measure success by academic achievement. In addition, because of the variability of early childhood behavior and development, preschool teachers may simply be better trained to deal with and accept differences in children regardless of their origin.

As most of the respondents were fairly inexperiences (less than five years as preschool teachers), there also exists the possibility that more experienced teachers become sensitized to the negative effects of labels.

Though the sample size was limited, the results of this study are encouraging. More research is needed, though, before concluding that the positive results are due to the use of the noncategorical label and not to the relative inexperience of the teachers or the nature of the preschool classroom. Keogh (1977) warned against the development of a new category and expressed concern that noncategorical terms may still reflect the same negative effects as other categorical labels. Teachers should continue to exercise caution in interpreting the meaning behind all labels, whether categorical or noncategorical.

There is no question that P.L. 99-457 was a major step forward in the education of young children and their families. Permitting the use of noncategorical labels over categorical ones for funding purposes was unquestionably an improvement. However, classroom teachers and other professional involved in the assessment process must carry the improvements one step further. We must train ourselves to focus our intervention on functional performances, observed and documented strengths and weaknesses, and not on labels, regardless of how innocuous they may appear. In addition, more research needs to be conducted on the effects of both the noncategorical terms, developmentally delayed and at-risk, as states continue to develop programs for the implementation of P.L. 99-457.

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